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## Spaze: Void States and the Mother-Child Relationship in *The Matriarch*, *The Dream Swimmer*, *Cousins* and *Baby No-Eyes*

### Abstract

The child under threat is a prominent feature of New Zealand literature; in the last twenty years of the twentieth century, a number of novels moved beyond the bounds of realism in exploring the struggles of this figure. Witi Ihimaera's *The Matriarch* (1986) and its sequel *The Dream Swimmer* (1997), and Patricia Grace's novels *Cousins* (1992) and *Baby No-Eyes* (1998) are among those that feature such exploration; their child characters are defined in relation to liminal or void states that manifest a specifically Maori metaphysics: Te Kore, in Ihimaera's novels, and the wheiao in Grace's.

JEN CRAWFORD

## Spaze: Void States and the Mother-Child Relationship in *The Matriarch*, *The Dream Swimmer*, *Cousins* and *Baby No-Eyes*

The child under threat is a prominent feature of New Zealand literature; in the last twenty years of the twentieth century, a number of novels moved beyond the bounds of realism in exploring the struggles of this figure. Witi Ihimaera's *The Matriarch* (1986) and its sequel *The Dream Swimmer* (1997), and Patricia Grace's novels *Cousins* (1992) and *Baby No-Eyes* (1998) are among those that feature such exploration; their child characters are defined in relation to liminal or void states that manifest a specifically Maori metaphysics: Te Kore, in Ihimaera's novels, and the wheiao in Grace's.

Te Kore, in traditional Maori cosmology, precedes all other existence. It is effectively summarised by D.R Simmons as the state

in which there is originally no life yet all things are in potential.... It is a state of unity with a presence which has no regard to time, place, extent or majesty. Nothing has been divided or parted, all things are. The life force, present in Te Kore, is the original twitch of life — that is all life in the Universe. (8)

As Cleve Barlow notes in *Tikanga Whakaaro: Key Concepts in Maori Culture* despite the 'unlimited potential for "being"' in Te Kore, this potential has 'no organised form' (55). Ihimaera's descriptions of Te Kore in his novels in some respects complies with this cosmology, yet his fictional use of it requires that it admit organised forms of life — in particular, the consciousnesses of certain characters.

The liminal world of Grace's novels is distinct from Ihimaera's Te Kore, though the two have elements in common. *Cousins* and *Baby No Eyes* both feature kehua (ghost) children; the realm which *Baby No Eyes* and the unnamed kehua of *Cousins* inhabit is a transitional realm, or wheiao. Barlow describes the wheiao as 'that state between the world of darkness and the world of light' (184); it traditionally encompasses a number of earthly and supernatural processes, including both birth (from the onset of labour to the child's first breath) and death (from the departure of the spirit to its arrival in the spirit world).

The presence of void or limbo spaces in each of these four novels is to some extent a concretised expression of the novels' approaches to realism. The 'other' realms inhabited by Grace's kehua characters, and visited by various of Ihimaera's characters, exist in parallel to a largely realist realm; breaches of or extensions beyond this realism are primarily located in Te Kore or the wheiao.

Both *The Matriarch* and *The Dream Swimmer* alternate between scenes from the childhood and adulthood of Tama, groomed as a child by his grandmother Artemis to take over the leadership of his iwi (tribe) and its struggle to regain ancestral lands. The former text focuses on Tama's relationship with Artemis ('the matriarch') and the latter on his relationship with his mother, Tiana ('the dream swimmer'). Both relationships become problematic as the women battle Tama and each other for control over his destiny; the critical moments of these conflicts are often located in metaphysical spaces.

Grace's novels also present familial relationships within the broader context of the Maori fight to gain land rights and self-determination. *Cousins* follows the lives of Makareta, Mata and Missy, cousins who are afforded very different life paths by circumstances and the decisions of their family's female elders. Makareta, like Tama, is groomed to take a leadership role, while Mata's childhood is one of extreme emotional and material deprivation; after the death of her mother (who was estranged by the elders) she grows up in an orphanage, making contact with her cousins only as an adult. Missy's life is somewhere between these two extremes; her story is narrated in part by the spirit of her twin, who died in the womb and whose presence was denied by the children's great-grandmother. A similar sibling relationship appears in *Baby No Eyes*. The 'baby' of the title is the spirit of an unborn child who had died in a car accident. The child's spirit is lodged first in the consciousness of her mother, and then of her brother Tawera, after medical interference with her body delays her departure to the spirit world. The book traces her relationship with Tawera as both characters grow towards maturity.

The structural operation of Te Kore and the wheiao within these four novels suggests magical realism: Wendy B. Faris notes that in magical realist fiction 'we experience the closeness or near-merging of two realms, two worlds. ... The magical realist vision exists at the intersection of two worlds, at an imaginary point inside a double-sided mirror that reflects in both directions' (172). Similarly, Rawdon Wilson describes the genre 'as co-presence, as duality and mutual tolerance, as different geometries at work constructing a double space' (210). In each of these novels, a physical world, accessible to all characters, co-exists with a metaphysical world, only accessible to some. This modelling of reality to some degree reflects the social model of biculturalism within which the characters of these books exist; characters such as Tama in *The Matriarch* and *The Dream Swimmer*, and Makareta in *Cousins*, participate in two different versions of reality, distinctly constructed according to the cultural base of those realities.

However, it is important to note that Te Kore and the wheiao, as they appear in these texts, are specifically Maori modes of existence — or non-existence. These states are complex in being simultaneously an affirmation of a particular cultural reality, and a representation of the internal and external dangers that threaten cultural identity. Aligned with the mothers of the texts, Te Kore and the

wheiao embody the maternal as both a creative and destructive presence. Survival of or liberation from the mother as void is an intimate task for the struggling child figure; their images evoke a very close and very early coupling of the processes of identity formation and destabilisation.

In each of these novels the presence of the metaphysical is fundamental to narrative development. In *The Matriarch*, the matriarch describes Te Kore in traditional terms, as ‘the Void, the Nothingness’ that precedes ‘Te Po, the Night’ (1986 2). In *The Dream Swimmer*, Tama’s experience of entering Te Kore is one of disembodiment; he does not cease to exist in this version of Te Kore, though he states at one point that ‘nothing can live there’ (1997 207). Though Te Kore is temporally and spatially very distinct from the realm he and other characters usually inhabit, it is accessible from that realm; characters enter it willingly through supernatural prowess (Artemis, Tiana, Tama and Tiana’s mermaid ancestress Hine Te Ariki) or are unwillingly confined to it (Tama and his uncle) by other characters. Usually the experience of Te Kore occupies a character’s consciousness while his/her physical body remains (often in a trance state) in the corporeal world; Tama’s Uncle Alexis, however, is confined there as a spirit after his death, and remains visible in a mirror. Most characters Ihimaera describes in Te Kore emerge after a period likened to ‘eternity’: either they are rescued by another character, or, as in Tama’s case, they spontaneously travel back to the present day through a summary retelling of the Maori creation mythology: the loss of identity is countered by a narrative reconstruction of self as a product of cosmogonic lineage.

In *Cousins* and *Baby No Eyes*, the perceptions Grace’s kehua children have of the wheiao are not, for the most part, drawn directly. However, the reader is given to know that, much like Tama’s Uncle Alexis, both children are suspended in this space due to a disruption of the natural progression of the soul from the realm of the living to the realm of the dead. In both novels the disruptions are due to incompletions or violations of accepted ritual process, and in particular the process of acknowledging and giving due respect to all life, no matter how embryonic. These disruptions occasion the presence of the wheiao. Where the conditions of characters’ lives had led to a loss of identity as created or affirmed through ritual, the wheiao transcends those conditions, enclosing the disembodied and dissipated child identities in a containing narrative.

The kehua child of *Cousins* tells us very little of his existence within this realm or of the realm itself, beyond that he remains as ‘a spritish trace’ that has ‘curled itself into’ Missy, his living twin (159) after his great-grandmother’s silent disposal of his physical remains. It is clear from his narration of Missy’s life that his awareness is largely of the world of the living, though he is not a physical part of that world. The kehua mourns his loss of identity through a narration which simultaneously records his presence. The contradiction of his existence aptly reflects the paradox of the space he inhabits — though he is

consigned to that space as a function of being denied in the world of the living, the wheiao is the space that allows him an existence.

In *Baby No-Eyes*, the eponymous spirit child asserts a much more powerful identity; yet this identity is also constructed in and around the condition of its own loss. She too participates in mundane life through her living sibling's consciousness, and unlike the kehua of *Cousins*, she offers some description of supernatural realms. She describes the experience of the 'nearly dead' for her brother Tawera:

There's a road. If you were nearly dead you'd see it.... You'd be walking along the roadway and you'd see all the different people gathered at their houses, all the different houses — people gossiping, laughing, playing games, laying out cards, decorating themselves while they waited. You'd hear singing and see dancing. There'd be people having turns up in the lookouts where they keep watch day and night — except that there's no day and night, there's perfumed light and weightless air. (222)

Distinct as it is, this description is not of the reality current to Baby No Eyes throughout most of the story. Turned back from this road by another spirit, Baby is lodged first in her mother's consciousness, then her brother's; her experience beyond this turning back until the point of her final departure to the spiritual realm is a limited, neophytic version of the reality her 'host' characters experience. She struggles to participate more fully in that reality, but as she grows (the development of her consciousness is a shadow version of the normal development of a living child) feels the limitations of her ethereal state more acutely, until her existence in the realm of the living is no longer tenable and she finally departs for the spirit world.

Like Ihimaera's Te Kore, the wheiao state inhabited by Grace's kehua children can be read as a symbol of the invalidated identity of both culture and individual. Ihimaera's child characters largely enter Te Kore under duress, and their experience there tends to be of a traumatic state of disembodiment; Grace's kehua characters are frozen in that state of disembodiment as a result of traumas which have overwhelmed their embryonic hold on physical life and which damage the development of their identities without extinguishing them. Yet both *Cousins* and *Baby No Eyes* also represent other versions of a void state, which reinforce the symbolic and cosmological significance of such states within Grace's work.

The character Mata is described in Courtney Bates' thesis, *Taki Toru*, as symbolically situated in Te Kore because 'her whole life has effectively been one of unrealised potential' (30). Bates also refers to the wheiao state in describing Mata's situation, suggesting that 'the dark road through which Mata must travel is a metaphor for the birth canal' (31), while her final reunion with her family represents her emergence into the world of light. If a distinction is to be maintained between the two states, the alignment of Mata with the wheiao is perhaps more accurate than with Te Kore; Mata has a past, and it is the disconnection from her original identity, imposed by that past, which arrests her in her liminal state. Rather than a being of purely unrealised potential, Mata is, much like the kehua

children, a being whose potential has been misdirected by circumstance, and thus remains embryonic.

Grace does create a direct reference to Te Kore in the epilogue of *Baby No-Eyes*, and in doing so centres negative spaces within the thematics of the novel. After the final departure of Baby No Eyes for the spirit realm, Tawera's artwork expresses her absence through the painful appearance of emptiness:

... each of these sketches, drawings, paintings, holds a missing piece, a section of paper that is blank. Not one is complete. In each one, space pushes itself outward, and in doing so brings the eye towards it. Or on closed eyes it imprints on the retina, a patch that is dark and trembling, the size and shape of an egg. (292)

Tawera struggles without success to fill the space in his pictures, until he is prompted by a sign on a door to '*Try Opposite*':

... now, instead of trying to shrink the egg of space, I begin to enlarge it. Instead of ending with that little unbreachable gap I begin with it, embrace it, let it be there, make it be there, pushing my drawing further and further to the outskirts. I persist with this, night after night, until one night everything's gone, fallen from the edges of the paper.

Spaze.

Te Kore, the nothing. (293)

Te Kore remains, in this reference, symbolic; what appears on Tawera's paper is a representation of a state (whether emotional or metaphysical) rather than the state itself. Its symbolic function is conveyed by its first appearance in the shape of an egg, and by the function it performs: the empty space that replaces Tawera's usual artwork is the seedbed for something entirely new — the visual representation of a sister who had had almost no physical presence.

The representation of Te Kore as an 'egg of space' also makes clear the symbolic relationship between that state and the child characters with whom it frequently appears in conjunction: both are used as representatives of creative potential and the inception of life at a stage so primordial that the difference between existence and non-existence is perceptual rather than physical.

The threats to individual children that appear in these novels do so in the contexts of the novels' concerns with the survival of Maori people and culture within the colonised world. The struggles for land rights and for the maintenance of cultural heritage are consistently foregrounded. These movements respond to conditions of cultural and material depletion, which in the novels are seen to have negative impact on individual children, as when Mata is denied access to her Maori family and Maori name by her Pakeha guardian, or when Gran Kura's sister dies as a child after prolonged abuse within a Pakeha school, or when Tama's childhood is relentlessly dedicated to preparation to lead the land rights movement. The confinement of the individual, particularly the child, to a dimension in which he or she is denied embodiment, identity and an acknowledged presence in the physical world, is strongly correlative to the experiences of Maori dispossession described within these stories.

The figure of the void or limbo state, however, cannot be read as a simple expression of the threat to Maori identity posed by external forces of colonialism and its racist manifestations. Both Te Kore and the wheiao are symbolically maternal states, a point which is reinforced by their representation in these texts, and which emphasises the centrality of mother-child relationships in each narrative. Te Kore is experienced by Tama in moments of close association with the two overwhelmingly powerful matriarchal figures the books present — his grandmother and mother; indeed, it is described as ‘that neverending womb’ (1986 365) in which the child may remain bound to the mother by ‘some invisible birthcord’ (1997 309). Both of Grace’s kehua children died physically while still in the womb; their subsequent suspension in a wheiao state is suggestive of a prolonged gestation, out of which they may be ‘born’ into the afterlife. Tama, too, escapes Te Kore via a birth-like experience; he travels from the Void through every stage of creation to be greeted by his grandmother, ‘with a madonna smile’ welcoming him to ‘the world of Man’ (1986 221). In those passages where he secures his metaphysical safety through the recitation of lineage, there is a parallel ‘birth’ of identity.

The combination of life-giving and life-threatening characteristics found in Te Kore is also found in the maternal characters the Ihimaera books describe. In the Ihimaera novels, Tiana’s physical and emotional abuse of her children is matched by Artemis’s spiritual and sexual invasion or reconstruction of her grandson’s identity. The matriarchal figures of *Cousins* and *Baby No-Eyes* are also culpable in the negation of child identity, though they do not share Tiana and Artemis’s apparent violence of intent. In *Cousins*, this theme is expressed through the failure of Kui Hinemate to acknowledge evidence of her great-grandson, and through Keita disowning her daughters when their choice of partners does not meet her standards. Keita’s failure to afford her offspring independence from her ideals is repeated in her treatment of her granddaughter Makareta, for whom she orchestrates a taumau (arranged) marriage which serves iwi (tribe) purposes but does not take account of Makareta’s own wishes.

If Keita fails her descendents by a rigid compliance with tradition, *Baby No-Eyes*’ Gran Kura fails hers by a fearful rejection of her culture — the ‘goodness and silence’ which she comes to identify as ‘evil’. Although she recognises the circumstances which had engendered that evil — ‘People became more and more silent, because if they spoke they would harm their children’ — the strongest attribution of fault she makes is to herself and those like her, who ‘had stolen their grandchildren’s lives’ (116). Such comments might be read, on the one hand, as symptomatic of an internalised racism which has the victims of colonialism shoulder the blame for its negative effects; on the other hand, Kura’s interpretation is consistent with a pattern of representation that appears in all four of these books, in which mother figures are neither victims nor innocents; though they may provide life and support for life, they also hold the potential to inflict great damage on their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.



Grace counterbalances this damage, in both *Cousins* and *Baby No Eyes*, with the care and love that maternal figures are also seen to give to their offspring. In Gran Kura's case, disclosure of family history and her dedication to Te Reo Maori (the Maori language) and the kohanga reo (Maori 'language nest' preschools) balances and resolves the evil she feels she has done with 'goodness and silence'. Nonetheless, all four of these novels register the presence of a matriarchal force of great destructive potential, represented both through female characters and through the Te Kore and the wheiao as maternal symbols.

It would be erroneous to see these women and their symbolic correlatives primarily as agents of an external force; their roles are broad, and embedded in the complex networks of Maori creation mythology and subsequent genealogies. Early in *The Matriarch*, Ihimaera invokes the figure of Hine titama, daughter of the first mortal man and woman, incestuous mate of her father, and, consequently, guardian of the underworld, where (in Ihimaera's words), she

[took] a position at the doorway through which all of her earthly descendants would pass. This was woman as Death, whom the demi-god, Maui, tried to conquer by entering her vagina. She crushed him with her thighs and thus death and destruction were brought permanently into the world. The female reproductive organs were termed 'whare o aitua or whare o mate' [sic], the house of misfortune and disaster. ( 23)

Ihimaera goes on to reflect that tikanga Maori (Maori custom) consequently assigned women as 'non-sacred and destructive. Many of women's activities, both prescribed and proscribed', he writes, 'emerged from this belief' (1986 23). This account of the female role in Maori culture as noa (non-sacred or profane) rather than tapu (sacred) is challenged by Atareta Poananga, who describes it as 'patently false' (1986 27), a creation of proscribed roles, rather than a reflection of them. Nonetheless, the well-documented Hine titama story, in its proposition of the female generative organs as a site of birth and death, reinforces the thematics surrounding Te Kore and the wheiao.

Ihimaera's reflections on the origins of female roles in Maori culture are supported by his own construction of women characters in *The Matriarch* and *The Dream Swimmer*. Artemis and Tiana as characters reinforce the association of destructive force with female progenitive function; these women are also, however, imbued with massive spiritual potency, and counter assumptions of their profane state with violent displays of mystical prowess. In contrast, Grace's maternal figures are anchored in realism, and cannot be seen to assume the same mythical proportions; yet there are traces of the Hine titama mythos in the child's experience of the gestating body, where the wheiao becomes a potentially inescapable trap between the realms of life and death.

This vein of imagery may be read as, to some degree, socially symbolic; depictions of the dangerous mother and the endangered child then may represent the individual not only as a colonial subject, but as a subject of their own 'mother' culture. The double-binds experienced by the individual who inhabits both Te Ao Maori and a contemporary world determined by Pakeha conventions are

repeatedly considered in these novels. Characters are faced with choices between realms which seem, to a degree, mutually exclusive; the demands of both worlds variously occur to characters as requiring a sacrifice of individual identity. Thus Makareta rebels against her taumau engagement though she values her Maori heritage, while Tama is repeatedly forced to choose between fulfilment of his grandmother's plans towards Maori liberation, and a 'Pakeha' life satisfying the demands of his wife, children and career. In each text there are moments when the demands of the mother culture occur to the protagonist as at least restrictive, perhaps even invasive or damaging. The imagery of the dangerous mother may also reflect the failure of the mother (individual or iconic) to protect the subject from the incursions of colonialism (as suggested in *Baby No Eyes* by Shane's anger and Gran Kura's guilt); if so, then it is interesting that this should be represented in terms of maternal responsibility.

Each of these texts presents a situation in which the child does not survive the maternal environment whole and intact; the challenge of the symbolic womb, as suggested by Te Kore and the wheiao, is here injurious or even fatal, as it is in the final narrative of Maui's death. Yet the 'egg of space', both as an image of the negated child and of the realm which contains the child and gives it its presence, represents the intimate link between nothingness and being, image and negative space. As the maternal space is recorded as one which simultaneously provides and denies existence, the child's narrative of lost existence is simultaneously a registration of survival that is both personal and cultural.

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